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SOVIET HOPES IN LAOS

The Kremlin leaders are willing to discuss the British proposal for peace in Laos because they want to frustrate the designs of the Chinese Communists in that strategically located Southeast Asian kingdom, eventually bringing it within the Soviet sphere of influence through a series of political didoes.

The Soviet overtures would not consider practical measures to end the hostilities, however. Rather, they would start preparations for an East-West conference, during which the SEATO nations could not very well take concerted military action against the Communist offensive timed for this period.

The Soviet Union hopes to build a satellite out of Laos around Prince Souvanna Phouma, recognized as Premier by the Soviet bloc. Through him, the Soviet leaders hope to gain acceptance of their interpretation of Laotian neutrality outside the Communist camp.

The Soviet plan of take-over through protracted political maneuvering, leading to "neutralization," clashes with the bellicose intentions of Red China in Laos. The Soviets wish to avoid open conflict with the SEATO countries, while the Red Chinese are of the opinion that the Communist guerrillas, fighting on familiar terrain, would come out victorious against the SEATO forces.

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SOVIET HOPES IN LAOS

Neutralization of Laos, the current Soviet line, was the theme of a policy-making article in the March 27 issue of Pravda. The article, "Laos Must Be Independent and Neutral," expressed Soviet willingness to discuss the British proposals for a cease-fire in Laos, the revival of the former International Control Commission and the summoning of a conference to settle the future of the country. Pravda stated:

The Soviet government and the governments of a number of other countries consider the holding of an international conference to settle the Laos problem a matter of urgency.... It is obvious that a realistic path toward the solution of the problems lies... in peace talks, and the re-establishment of the International Commission, as proposed by the Soviet Union and by other peace-loving states.

The positive Soviet reaction to proposals for peace negotiations on Laos is motivated by the desire of the Kremlin leaders to avoid an open conflict with the U. S. A., as well as by the lack of agreement between Moscow and Peking on what policy should be pursued in Laos. The Soviet leaders want to forestall Chinese military intervention, but realize that they would be incapable of stopping it if the situation were to deteriorate further.

A threat to summon aid from Communist China, which has a common frontier with Laos, was made over Radio "Voice of Laos" in North Vietnam by Prince Souphanouvong, founder of the Pathet Lao, and Chairman of the Laotian Communist Neo-Lao-Hak-Sat, or the Laotian Patriotic Front: "If the American imperialists and their allies unleash aggression against our country, we shall turn for military aid to all the peace-loving countries of the world" (reported in Pravda, March 24, 1961).

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Close scrutiny of the Pravda article of March 27 does not give ground, however, for assuming that it represents a real step forward toward immediate East-West negotiations. It looks, rather, as if the Soviet Union intends to begin a complicated and protracted series of political maneuvers with both Washington and Peking, in the hope of eventually bringing Laos, and later all of Indo-China, into the Soviet sphere of influence. One of the key figures in these maneuvers seems to be Prince Souvanna Phouma, recognized by the Soviet bloc as the legal Premier of Laos, at present traveling in Europe.

Analysis of the Pravda article of March 27, and of several other official Soviet statements, leads to the following general conclusions:

The Kremlin's agreement to peace talks on the basis of the British proposals does not imply their acceptance, since the Soviet Union gives them a quite different order of precedence, altering the whole basis for any future armistice negotiations to suit its policy toward Laos. For example, the British memorandum suggested that first of all a cease-fire in Laos must be arranged and the International Control Commission must be revived. Only then, provided these two first stages meet with success, should an international conference be held. The Kremlin, on the other hand, wants to start with the conference, to lay down fresh directives for the International Commission. In other words, the Soviet government does not want to begin with practical measures to end hostilities but with a discussion of the political aspect of the situation. Also, according to the Soviet proposals, Communist China should attend any future conference on an equal footing with the other great powers. But the arrangement of such a conference would take time, and it is not clear what the Kremlin's attitude would be in the meantime over the cease-fire question. Pravda makes the reservation that "a lasting solution can only be found if it corresponds with the interests of the Laotian people." The Soviet government can thus assert that even the question of a preliminary cease-fire is not entitled to interfere with the "just national-liberation struggle" in Laos.

If the Soviet Union adopts this attitude, the resulting events could lead to a repetition of the situation in Indo-China at the time of the 1954 Geneva conference, when the fortress of Dienbienphu was stormed by the Communist forces while the conference was in session, with the result that the negotiating position of the West was weakened. There are grounds for thinking that the Kremlin would welcome further Pathet Lao military successes provided they are achieved without any direct intervention. If this is the case, one may expect the Soviet Union to be less concerned with an immediate cessation of hostilities than with starting preparations for an East-West conference, during which the SEATO nations would find their hands tied if they wished to take military action to stem the Communist advance. It should be noted that the Soviet Union ascribes this

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advance not to Communist guerrillas but to the troops of the "legal government of Souvanna Phouma, supported by Pathet Lao detachments" (Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodniye Otnosheniya, World Economics and International Relations, Moscow, No. 1, 1961).

On the "day of solidarity with Laos," held in the Soviet Union on March 15, 1961, the chairman of the "committee for struggle for peace, neutrality and national unity of Laos," Pheng Phongasavan, and the leader of the Neo-Lao-Hak-Sat, Nuhak Phoumavan, gave an interview to Soviet correspondents (Pravda, March 15, 1961) in which they emphasized the links between Pathet Lao and "the Soviet people," without mentioning Communist China or Communist North Vietnam. They also stressed their "gratitude to the Soviet Union and other peace-loving states for the enormous efforts they are making for peace... in Laos."

A number of statements in the Soviet press indicate that in any talks on Laos the Soviet leaders will insist on the neutralization of Laos under the control of Prince Souvanna Phouma, who enjoys Soviet support, and on the inclusion of the Neo-Lao-Hak-Sat in the government. Pravda has already declared that peace in Laos can be achieved only on principles "acceptable to the legal government (that of Souvanna Phouma) and the national-patriotic forces."

It appears from the activities of Prince Souvanna Phouma in Asia, Africa and Europe that the Soviet Union hopes to find him of assistance in securing acceptance of their interpretation of Laotian neutrality outside the Communist bloc. Before beginning his world tour, Souvanna Phouma was visited in the capital of Cambodia, Phnôm-Penh, by Ambassador Abramov, who handed him an official Soviet invitation to pay a state visit to the USSR as Premier of the royal Laotian government (Pravda, March 17, 1961). And in Paris, Souvanna Phouma had discussions with the Soviet Ambassador Vinogradov. In his talks with Western leaders, the Prince emphasizes the necessity of making Laos completely neutral and tries to prove that his neutrality policy is not pro-Communist. One must remember, however, that in August, 1960, following the military coup-d'etat which brought him to power, Souvanna Phouma first established diplomatic relations with the USSR, accepted Soviet aid instead of American aid, and exchanged "friendship missions" with Communist China and North Vietnam.

The whole of Indo-China would be threatened if Laos were to fall into Communist hands, and the West would suffer a serious strategic setback. A belt comprising Communist North Vietnam, Laos and probably Cambodia, would be formed, bisecting the peninsula. It is likely that Cambodia would fall in with the two countries, since its rulers lean toward the Communist bloc. Its Premier, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, declared on August 10 last year: "If I have to ally my country with some foreign power, it would probably not be with

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one in the West, which has never understood or supported us." (quoted in Mirovaya Ekonomika i Mezhdunarodniye Otnosheniya, No. 1, Moscow, 1961).

The most interesting development in the present Laotian crisis is the evident clash of views between Moscow and Peking. In contrast to the Soviet wish to avoid any direct conflict with the U. S. A. in Laos, Red China's wish is for the guerrilla war to continue, with the hope that in the event of SEATO or American intervention, the jungle war could be won in the long run by the Communist guerrilla forces, fighting on familiar terrain.

It is likely that the Soviet leaders made use of the recent conference of the Warsaw Pact nations to rally the East European satellites to the support of their policy on Laos, and thus bring pressure to bear on Communist China. It is quite certain that the Soviet leaders do not wish Laos to fall into Chinese hands, and they consequently regard neutralization of the country as the best answer to the crisis at present. Neutralization is also likely to further the Soviet policy of bringing Laos within the Soviet sphere of influence.